

CHAMPLAIN BUILDING

**(Originally called the
POWERS BUILDING)**

**37 South Wabash Avenue
Chicago, Illinois**

**Preliminary Staff Summary of Information
Submitted to the
Commission on Chicago Landmarks
October, 1992**

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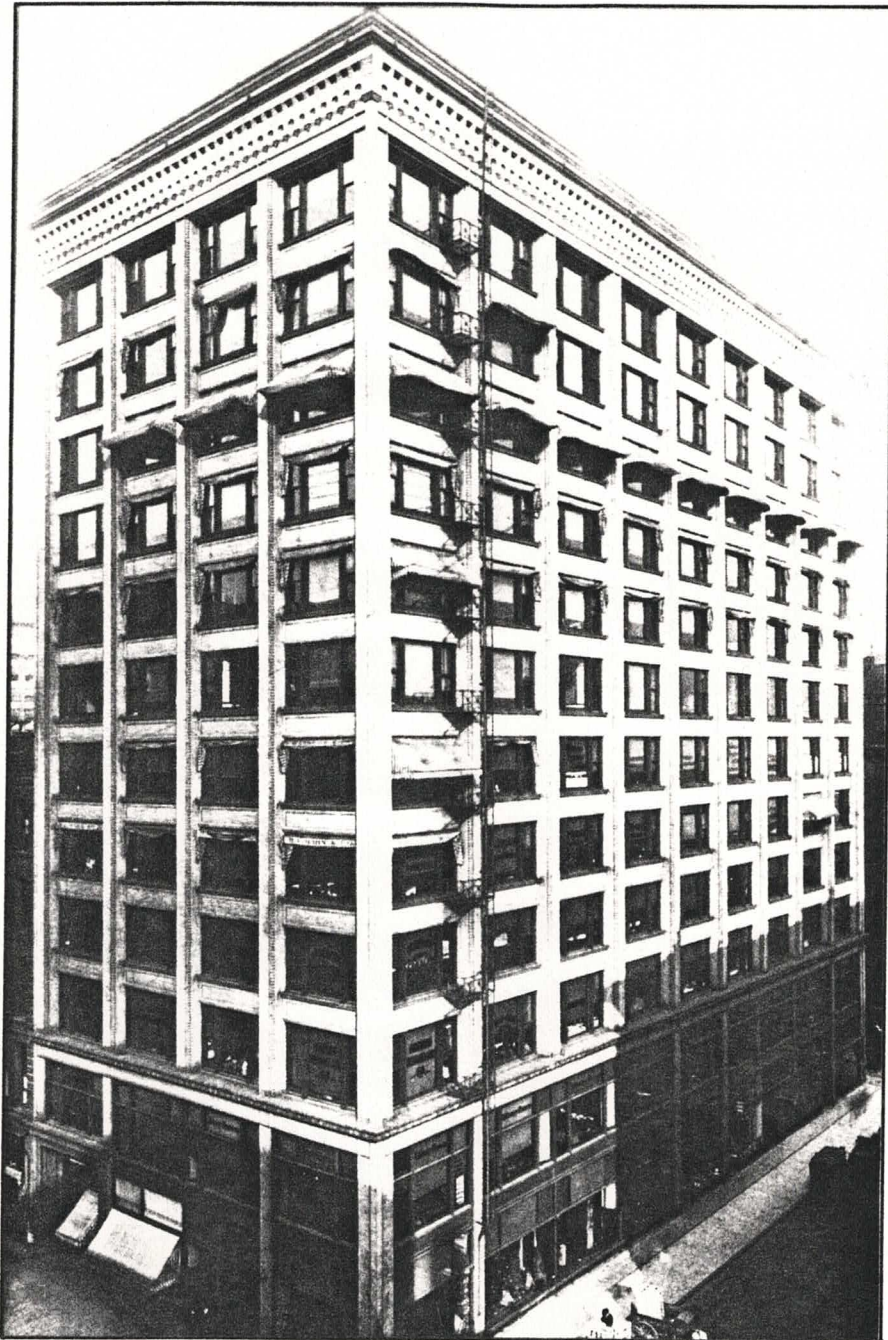
Date: 1903

Architect: Holabird & Roche

Erected in 1903 as the Powers Building, the Champlain Building is an outstanding example of a commercial building style important in the development of downtown Chicago and in the history of Chicago architecture. Bearing all the hallmarks of the Chicago school of architecture, the Champlain Building was designed by Holabird & Roche, the firm most acclaimed for their successful execution of numerous buildings in this commercial style and who, according to architectural historian Carl Condit, "most completely represented the purpose and achievement of the mainstream of the Chicago school."

The Architectural Partnership: Holabird and Roche

Few, if any, architectural firms have left as significant an imprint on a major American city as Holabird and Roche and its successor firm Holabird and Root have done on Chicago. Yet neither of its founders, William Holabird (1854-1923) nor Martin Roche (1855-1927) were native Chicagoans. Holabird was born in New York State, the son of Samuel Beckley Holabird, a general in the United States Army. Educated at West Point, he came to Chicago in 1875 where he worked part-time in the office of the Army Quartermaster General and part-time as an engineer for noted Chicago architect and engineer William LeBaron Jenney. Roche, born in Cleveland, Ohio, had come to Chicago in 1857. His education was limited to elementary school and the school of the Chicago Art Institute which he left in 1867 to begin an apprenticeship to a cabinetmaker. He too received practical training as an architect in Jenney's office which he entered in 1872. In 1880, Holabird formed his own firm with Ossian C. Simonds and in 1881 they were joined by Roche. In 1883, Simonds left to specialize in landscape architecture; the firm then became known as Holabird and Roche, a name it would retain for four and a half decades.



The Champlain Building, originally called the Powers Building, as it appeared shortly after construction in 1903. (Photograph from *"The Chicago School of Architecture"* by Carl Condit)

In terms of personalities it was Holabird, with his commanding presence, outgoing manner, and wide range of social and business acquaintances who procured the commissions. Roche, a life-long bachelor of introverted disposition and a talented designer remained in the office supervising the projects.

Possibly through the influence of Holabird's father, the firm's first major commission was for work at the Army post at Fort Sheridan, an assignment that would provide a steady income stream over the next decade. However, the pioneering skyscraper design of the Tacoma Building (1886-89; demolished 1929) ultimately established the fledgling firm's credentials. Conspicuously sited on the northeast corner of LaSalle and Madison streets, the Tacoma attracted worldwide attention. The design incorporated the most extensive use of skeleton construction to that date with the exterior walls opened up to an extraordinary degree by means of generous, closely spaced windows. Numerous commercial commissions from Chicago's most important developers followed the Tacoma. These included the Pontiac Building (1891), the southern addition to the Monadnock Block (1892-93; designated a Chicago Landmark in 1973), the Old Colony Building (1893-94; designated a Chicago Landmark in 1978), and the Marquette Building (1893-95; addition 1905-06, designated a Chicago Landmark in 1975). The latter is considered the ultimate fulfillment of the aesthetic and technical aspects of the Chicago school program. Certain common elements distinguish Holabird and Roche's office buildings: a strongly articulated, cellular wall punctuated by bay-wide openings of Chicago windows (a broad fixed sash flanked by narrow movable sashes), continuous and slightly projecting piers, recessed spandrels, and skillfully handled ornament in terra cotta designed to frame window areas and accent the narrow bands of piers and spandrels. Other noteworthy Holabird and Roche buildings in this genre are the McClurg Building (1899-1900), the Chicago Building (1904), and the Brooks Building (1909-1910). However, these spare functionalist office blocks so influential on subsequent commercial architecture were only a part of Holabird and Roche's repertoire.

During the first decades of the twentieth century Holabird and Roche further enhanced their reputation in the business community with designs for some of the major retailers on State Street such as the Mandel Brothers, the Rothschilds, and the Netchers, owners of the Boston Store. These years also saw the firm start work for electrical and utility companies, becoming after 1910 a kind of house architect for the Chicago Telephone Company (later the Illinois Bell Telephone Company). Another new arena was opulent hotel design with the LaSalle Hotel (1908-1909; now demolished) proving Holabird and Roche as the Midwest's most expert architects in the planning of very large and complicated city hostelryes. Related to this kind of institutional design was the University Club of Chicago (1909), considered a particular achievement of Martin Roche. As further evidence of their competence, Holabird and Roche was awarded a significant public building commission for the mammoth City Hall-County Building (1906-1911; designated a Chicago Landmark in 1982). Also well-known in Chicago as the work of Holabird and



The Champlain Building is one of the outstanding examples of Holabird and Roche's approach to commercial building design, allowing the building's facade to clearly express the grid of the structural frame and the inherent verticality of the multi-story office building. (*Photograph by Henry Dovilas for the Commission on Chicago Landmarks*)

Roche is the Chicago Temple Building (1922-23), Soldier Field (1923-25), the Palmer House (1923-25), and the Stevens Hotel (1925-27; now Chicago Hilton and Towers).

By the beginning of the 1920s Holabird and Roche was one of the largest architectural firms in the country with particular domination throughout the Midwest. Although Roche continued the firm after the death of Holabird in 1923, its two most active forces by that time were Holabird's son John A. and John W. Root, Jr., the son of one of Chicago's most gifted architects and Daniel Burnham's partner. With the death of Roche in 1927, the firm was reorganized as Holabird and Root. Masterfully designing a series of office buildings in the American Art Deco setback skyscraper style, this successor partnership would prove equal to the creative tradition of the first generation.

The Construction of the Powers Building

The building at 37 South Wabash Avenue was originally called the Powers Building after Orville Marcellus Powers, principal of the business school that occupied the upper eight floors of the building. Born on a farm in McDonough County, Illinois, on November 2, 1852, and educated at the Macomb, Illinois, High School and Quincy College, Powers came to Chicago in 1872. Here, he and his younger brother Millard R., a lawyer, founded the Metropolitan Business College in 1873. Originally located at 77 & 79 Madison Street opposite the McVicker's Theater, the institution later expanded to a second building on the corner of Wabash Avenue and Madison Street.

The school's curriculum offered bookkeeping, arithmetic, German, commercial law, business forms and correspondence, using both manual penmanship and a new machine, the typewriter invented in 1873. In business offices across the country the fast growing American economy had created an avalanche of paperwork and something was needed to speed writing. Apparently male clerks were disdainful of this new tool but women found it a delight to operate and proficiency in typewriting became the entree for women into the work force. Whereas in 1870 there had been but seven women "lady typewriters" in all of America, by 1900 there were over 100,000. The school also contained a "Practical Department" which, as the catalogue described "is a business world in itself . . . fitted up with banks and offices, and resembles a great counting room, supplied with every convenience." Here in the simulated environment of a real bank or office, students gained hands-on work experience. The Metropolitan Business College received the endorsement not only of Chicago's business and civic leaders but also of its students. Testimonials from Macomb, Joliet, Woodstock, Sycamore, and Kankakee, Illinois, demonstrate the influence of this institution throughout the state.

An able proprietor, Powers was also a publisher. With G. L. Howe, he co-authored a number of business textbooks including *The Complete Accountant* and in 1883 *The Secrets of Success in Business* which comprehensively explained how business was done on Wall Street and the New York Stock Exchange, at the Chicago Board of Trade, the New

Orleans Cotton Exchange, and the Union Stock Yards of Chicago. The contents page of the book illustrates standard business subjects useful to the nineteenth-century business student such as "Detecting Counterfeit Money" and "Ornamental Penmanship." Just as computer skills are indispensable to the 1990s, so too was penmanship to the 1890s. Powers apparently was an accomplished "penman" proficient in Business Writing, Off-Hand Flourishing, Pen Drawing, Lettering and Card Writing. He taught this subject himself and examples of his work adorned the walls of the college as an inspiration to the students.

Powers was progressive in advertising the advantages of a business education, not just for clerks and bookkeepers but for the merchant and lawyer as well. He even extended this philosophy to women saying "If the widow, with her other sorrows, has added thereto the consciousness that she has no knowledge of business, she is indeed at the mercy of others." In Powers' view, the business college fulfilled a societal need on a par with law and medical schools. Writing in 1888, he described the old apprenticeship type of education, for instance, for lawyers and doctors. He then continued:

The process of educating clerks into a theoretical and practical acquaintance with mercantile life was, if possible, even more tedious and diverting in its tendencies than either of the former. Washing store windows, dusting counters, carrying bundles, sewing on tags, going to the bank as often as once a month, doing a little clerical work, and becoming familiar with a limited line of goods, constituted the humdrum life of the clerk preparing to become one of the merchant princes of this goodly land. But the tedium of such an education and the narrowness of its reach, were found to be utterly inadequate to the increasing demands of American commerce.

By the time the Metropolitan Business College moved into the building at 37 S. Wabash, the school had a proven thirty-year track record. Its growth paralleled Chicago's rapid rise to prominence as the economic epicenter of the Midwest during the last three decades of the nineteenth century. Chicago had grown by attracting people in search of economic opportunity. Undoubtedly, the Metropolitan Business College facilitated many in this quest.

Other tenants in the building included the H.E. Hahn Company, a family-owned and -operated wholesale jeweler, and the Frank B. White Company, advertising agents. The managing agent for the building was Aldis, Aldis, Northcote & Co., a construction and management firm highly regarded in Chicago real estate circles. Owen Aldis, the senior partner and founder, was a Yale graduate and son of a wealthy Vermont family of lawyers who had come to Chicago at the age of twenty-four in 1875. The July 26, 1924 issue of *The Economist* wrote of Aldis that he "was a pioneer and as such he established the construction and management of office building business upon a high level, so high that everyone engaged in the management of office buildings has envied and emulated his ideas, their standard and excellence."

In 1879, Aldis had been engaged by the Brooks estate in Massachusetts to invest on their behalf in Chicago commercial real estate. Patronizing the young architects who later achieved recognition as the Chicago school, Aldis saw to it that the shrewd ideas of his Boston-based client for the design and construction of the skyscraper office building were efficiently and, as it turned out creatively, translated into bricks and mortar. No member of the Brooks family ever came to visit their Chicago properties and it would be Owen Aldis who, as described in *Offices in the Sky*, had "more to do with the rise of the city's permanent business district than any other man." He is considered the catalyst for such monuments as Burnham and Root's Monadnock and Rookery buildings and for Holabird and Roche's 1895 Marquette Building. It was for the latter that Aldis developed eight basic principles of design and profitable management for a first-class office block, many of which still make eminent sense today. The relationship of Owen Aldis, the Brooks brothers, and Holabird and Roche was a long and mutually profitable one destined not only to have a significant impact on the visage of Chicago's Loop but also on the whole history of commercial architecture.

At the time of the Champlain's construction, the firm was composed of Owen Aldis, Englishman A.S. Northcote, and Aldis' younger brother Arthur. Eight years before in 1895, Holabird and Roche had designed a house for Arthur Aldis at 1258 North Lake Shore Drive (part of the Seven Houses on Lake Shore Drive District; designated a Chicago Landmark in 1989). A small but elegant townhouse said to be an adaptation of a well-known Venetian palace, the cream stone and rose brick residence with elaborately carved balconies is far removed from the striking simplicity of Holabird and Roche's office blocks. Architectural historians have hitherto concentrated almost exclusively on Holabird and Roche's contributions to the Chicago school. However, as architectural historian Robert Bruegmann notes:

In the more pluralist climate of the last few years this approach has come to appear unnecessarily narrow and anachronistic. The term Chicago school, as used since World War II, is in fact more a product of European modernist polemics of the 1920s than it is of late nineteenth-century Chicago. . . . Today, freed from the blinders imposed by the Chicago school label, it is possible once again to appreciate the buildings of Holabird and Roche and of other architects of the late nineteenth century in all their ornamental splendor and diversity.

Also involved in the development of the Champlain Building was another "mover and shaker" in Chicago's real estate community, Bryan Lathrop. Born on August 6, 1844, to a prominent Virginia family, Bryan Lathrop became one of the most successful real estate men in Chicago specializing in serving as trustee and manager of estates. He is listed as one of the four trustees of the "Library Bureau (Business School Powers)" which is the official client listing for the Champlain Building in the Holabird and Roche records. An extremely wealthy man, he was a civic as well as a financial leader with his greatest interest

being the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. Lathrop was a longtime patron of Holabird and Roche, awarding them one of their first commissions for the walls, gate, and chapel at Graceland Cemetery. Although Lathrop engaged the East Coast firm of McKim, Mead and White in 1892 for the design of his house at 120 East Bellevue Place (now the Fortnightly Club; designated a Chicago Landmark in 1973), Holabird and Roche were the supervising architects for the project.

The Architecture of the Champlain Building

The Champlain Building is a 13-story, steel-framed structure clad in light gray pressed brick and terra cotta with four bays on Wabash Avenue and nine bays on Monroe Street. It is one of the purest examples of Holabird and Roche's approach to commercial building design, allowing the building's facade to clearly express the grid of the structural frame and the inherent verticality of the multi-story office building.

Characteristic of office buildings of the period, the facade of the first two stories was treated differently than the stories above to express their variation in function and plan. The treatment of these floors is of particular significance in that it incorporates an excellent early example of the curtain-wall ribbon window. Here the structural columns are set behind the window, thereby increasing the glass area, and emphasizing the non-load-bearing identity of the exterior skin of a metal framed building.

The area above is a straightforward rectangle which is divided by smaller rectangular bays that express the underlying structure. Special emphasis is given to the piers, which project out uninterrupted from the plane of the building and are accented by thin line moldings. A simple brick-tooth molding alongside the thin line molding further delineates the contour of the piers. The spandrels are set back slightly and characterized by a recessed panel the full width of the bay. The cornice of the building consists of a series of geometric brick patterns corbelled out from the plane of the facade and is an effective means of visually capping this forthright structure. This was originally topped by a series of heavier, stepped-out stringcourses which have been removed.

A notable aspect of the Champlain Building design is that the top story treatment is not differentiated from that of the lower stories, a departure from works by other architectural firms of the period who typically designed tall commercial office buildings in a tripartite "base-shaft-capital" composition. Because the function and plan of the Champlain Building's top story did not vary from the lower stories, Holabird and Roche frankly expressed it on the facade as a continuation of the overall office fenestration rather than varying the size or shape of the windows to create a visual terminus to the composition. As a result, the Champlain Building conveys a strong modernist expression that represents the best and highest ideals of the Chicago school of architecture. Enhancing this effect on the Champlain Building is the absence of any visual corner reinforcements.

Another singular feature of the Champlain Building is the use of molded face brick for the exterior skin. At the time the building was designed, brick had largely fallen out of favor as the cladding for large commercial office buildings. Although brick had been used prominently in buildings such as Burnham and Root's Rookery Building (1885-88) and Holabird and Roche's own Pontiac Building (1889-91), the impact of the Classical Revival following the World's Columbian Exposition of 1893 favored ornamental terra cotta or stone. The Champlain Building takes advantage of molded brick's ability to create ornamental coursing for an architectural effect. Just as molded pressed brick provided an innovative expression for the bearing walls of Burnham and Root's Monadnock Block (1891), so too does the Champlain Building represent a similar creative expression for the cladding of a metal frame.

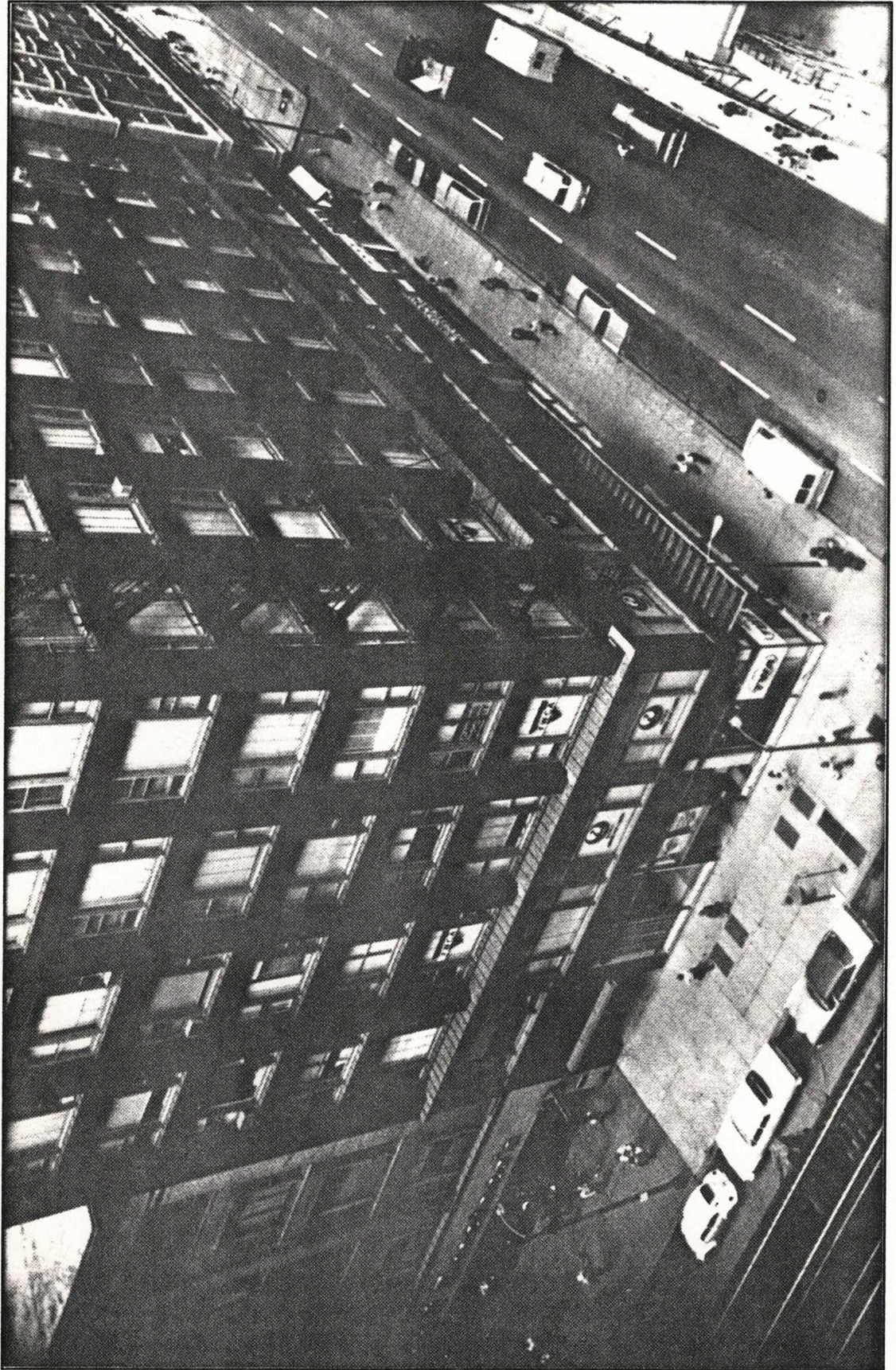
The name change from the Powers to the Champlain Building occurred in May of 1923. Holabird and Roche had done additional work on the building for a new entrance in 1921 and further first floor remodeling in 1922. *The Economist* of February 24, 1923, which detailed a new decorative treatment of the entrance vestibule also noted of the building, "Proximity to the retail shopping center of Michigan Avenue and State Street has made this building a favorite one with large wholesale houses. Its excellent situation and light has created a demand for smaller spaces for office tenancy and retail shops." The frank functionalism of the Chicago school exterior did not always apply to the interior; in fact, here embellishment and artistic enhancement were favored. This was in keeping with one of Owen Aldis' fundamentals of office design which stipulated, "The parts every person entering sees must make the lasting impression. Entrance, first story lobby, elevator cabs, elevator service, public corridors, toilet rooms must be very good."

Another substantial change to the Champlain Building came in 1964 when the major Chicago firm of Skidmore, Owings and Merrill was commissioned to re-configure parts of the first and second floor space for the ticket office of Trans World Airlines. This scheme, however, was not incompatible with the original design, as Carl Condit noted:

This handsome work of contemporary design involved the replacement of the original subdivided glass curtain at the base with a continuous area of transparent glass. The result is that the alterations to the interior and the modernization of the exterior envelope are entirely in keeping with the overall form of the building. The best as well as the simplest and least expensive way to modernize the structures of the Chicago school is to do as its own architects did, that is, to clothe the base in glass.

Notwithstanding almost ninety years of continuous productive use, the Champlain Building retains substantial integrity.

The Champlain Building is a prime example of the office block perfected by Holabird and Roche. It helps to define the rich variety of building treatments available within the overall sobriety and functionally expressive approach to skyscraper design of the Chicago



The only major change to the Champlain Building was the 1964 remodeling of parts of the ground and second floor by Skidmore, Owings and Merrill for the ticket office of TWA. The new scheme, however, was in keeping with the original design of the structure. (Photograph by Henry Dvulas for the Commission on Chicago Landmarks)

school. In distinguishing one from another of the similar Chicago school buildings, Carl Condit has noted:

The distinctions of the designs arose from variations on moldings, ornamental details, and clustered shafts, combined with subtle differences in the proportions of bays and in the depths of the window reveals. Each building clearly belongs to a unified body of work--a local school of architecture--yet each possesses its own individualized features.

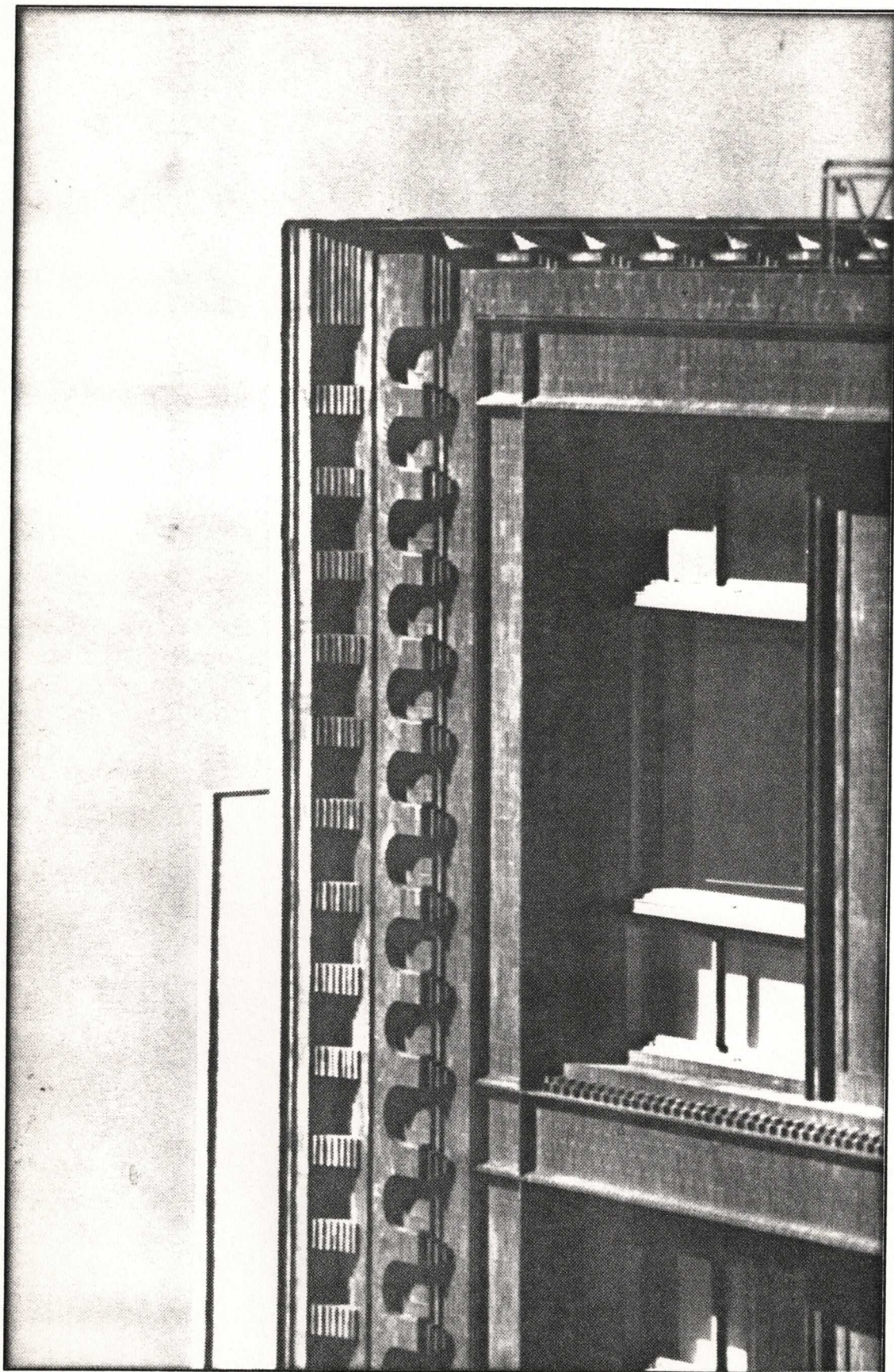
Certainly, among Holabird and Roche's Loop office blocks, the Champlain is the most austere and direct. Created initially to house a business school, it appears an appropriate visual representation of the philosophy of that school's owner who in the 1880s wrote:

The great demand of the day is practical knowledge, suited to the everyday affairs of life. The mission of the modern, thorough, and systematic Business College is to impart a sharp, decisive, and practical education, suited to the requirements and responsibilities of life.

In its 1974 inventory of the Loop area, the Landmarks Preservation Council of Illinois listed only twenty-four premier structures. Of those built in the first decade of the twentieth century, five are by Holabird and Roche. The Champlain is included, along with the Chicago Building (1904), the Mandel Brothers Annex (1900, 1905), the McClurg Building (1900), and the Brooks Building (1910). The number and excellence of these buildings illustrate the character of Holabird and Roche's unique success. Robert Brueggemann explains:

The partners were unusually attentive to the needs of the businessmen who gave them most of their largest commissions, and they were masters in supervising all of the details involved in the design and construction of some of the country's most complicated building types. Responding to their clients' changing demands, the firm was quick to incorporate new technical innovations and advances in construction, often revising dramatically in the process the way buildings looked. . . . The buildings uniformly reflect an attention to detail and refinement rare in commercial work, and meticulous construction supervision by the firm.

The Champlain Building is a part of this tradition. Epitomizing the aesthetic of the Chicago school so masterfully brought to maturity by Holabird and Roche, it is an integral part of Chicago's singular architectural identity.



A detail of the Champlain Building showing the thin line moldings which delicately frame the piers. Holabird and Roche were considered masters at this kind of subtle emphasis. (Photograph by John Lee for the *Chicago Historic Resources Survey*)

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Other historical and architectural material is on file at the office of the Commission on Chicago Landmarks and is available to the public.

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The Commission on Chicago Landmarks was established in 1968 by city ordinance, and was given the responsibility of recommending to the City Council that specific landmarks be preserved and protected by law. The ordinance states that the Commission, whose nine members are appointed by the Mayor, can recommend any area, building, structure, work of art, or other object that has sufficient historical, community, or aesthetic value. Once the City Council acts on the Commission's recommendation and designates a Chicago Landmark, the ordinance provides for the preservation, protection, enhancement, rehabilitation, and perpetuation of that landmark. The Commission assists by carefully reviewing all applications for building permits pertaining to the designated Chicago Landmarks. This insures that any proposed alteration does not detract from the qualities that caused the landmark to be designated.

The Commission makes its recommendations to the City Council only after extensive study. This preliminary summary of information has been prepared by the Commission staff and was submitted to the Commission when it initiated consideration of the historical and architectural qualities of this potential landmark.



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